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SUBJECT: FREEDOM OF PRESS QUARTERLY: JANUARY - MARCH 2009

Ref: Kinshasa 245

¶1. (SBU) Summary: The South Kivu provincial Director of Communications threatened on February 16 to shut down radio and television stations that broadcast criticisms of the government. A Mbandaka civilian court sentenced a television correspondent to six months in prison for defamation against the embattled Equateur governor. Congolese authorities issued a media blackout and prevented journalists from reporting the events surrounding the opening of Parliament and the plight of National Assembly President Vitale Kamerhe. Policemen severely beat a Radio Okapi reporter on March 2 for unknowingly entering a closed session of the Kasai Occidental Provincial Assembly. Improvement in respect for individual freedoms does not appear to be taking root in the national or provincial governments. End summary.

¶2. (U) The Director of the South Kivu provincial division of the Congolese Postal, Telephone, and Communications Service (PTT), Paul Kabingwa, issued a communique on February 16 threatening to shut down radios and television stations operating in Bukavu. Kabingwa denounced the airing of criticism of the government, equating it with rebellion. To date, this threat has not been carried out.

¶3. (U) On February 20, a Mbandaka civilian court sentenced Congo Web television correspondent Bienvenu Yay to six months in prison and \$2,500 in damages for defamation of the embattled Governor of Equateur, Jose Makila. In a report originally broadcast on January 20, Yay discussed the house arrest of the provincial governor. The report also referred to the investigation by a parliamentary commission into the alleged embezzlement of 85 million Congolese francs (over \$119,000) by Jose Makila. Yay's defense attorneys have appealed the verdict.

¶4. (SBU) On March 15, a group of Congolese policemen (PNC) interrupted a press conference given by the local NGO La Voix Sans Voix (VSV), beating and arresting three VSV activists (reftel) while they were announcing a proposed protest to the forced resignation of National Assembly President Vitale Kamerhe. On March 16, Congolese authorities ordered a media blackout of the opening of the Assembly and Senate sessions in Parliament. The same day a private television station Tele 7 was interrupted for five hours after attempting to broadcast an interview with Kamerhe. On March 19, authorities interrupted the broadcast of another station, Antenne A, while it was running a program on the crisis in the National Assembly. On March 18, police brutally dispersed a group of newspaper vendors in Kinshasa for distributing papers carrying Kamerhe's March 16 speech at the opening of Parliament. A FARDC officer severely beat South Kivu radio journalist Dominique Kalonzo on March 19 in Uvira and threatened to close his radio station, Le Messenger du Peuple. Kalonzo told us that it was a reprisal for his March 14 report that covered the forced dispersion by police of a pro-Kamerhe march.

¶5. (SBU) Radio Okapi reported that on March 2, policemen severely beat Okapi journalist Kathy Katayi, who was attempting to cover a plenary session of the Kasai Occidental provincial assembly in

Kananga. The order to beat her and to forcibly remove her (dragged down the stairs and into the street) allegedly came from the cabinet of the assembly g"QOe# !-QNQwp%5Q{e`E-LSociety Association told us that Katayi was unaware that the provincial assembly had gone into closed session. Although, the provincial assembly initially announced an investigation into the matter, the civil society association said that the investigation was dropped.

¶6. (SBU) Comment: Congolese authorities continue to restrict the freedom of speech and mistreat journalists. Improvement in respect for individual freedoms does not appear to be taking root in the national or provincial governments. The bulk of attention has recently been centered on the Kamerhe-Kabila political dispute, but this does not excuse GDRC actions to silence the press or critics. End comment.  
GARVELINK